Increase of Hantavirus infections in Wallonie

In the month of May 2003, 26 cases of hantavirus infection have been reported in Belgium by the IPH sentinel laboratories network and by the Reference Laboratory (Queen Astrid Military Hospital, Brussels). This number has increased compared to previous months (monthly average of 7 cases in January-April 2003) and compared to the same period of last year (3 cases in May 2002). Classically, hantavirus infection displays a resurgence every 2 to 3 years with a seasonal peak in Belgium around June-July. Significant increases in the number of detected cases were reported in Belgium in summers 1996, 1999 and 2001. In May 2001, 20 cases had been reported.

Among the cases reported in May 2003, 22 cases (85% of total) live in Wallonie, with residence spread over 4 provinces and without apparent geographical clustering. The number of laboratories reporting cases has been stable over the last 4 years.

In France, an exceeding number of hantavirus infections has also been reported in January 2003. Most cases resided in the Northern part of France, including several departments that neighbor Belgium. The occurrence of such increase raised concern that the number of infections will also rise in the summer. Further information is available on: http://www.invs.sante.fr/recherche/index2.asp?txtQuery=Hantavirus.

Hantavirus infection is a viral infection spread to humans by contact with rodent or with rodent’s excretions (urine, faeces, or saliva). Persons at risk are those having direct or indirect contact with rodents, those working with wood and persons involved in the renovation or cleaning of old houses. People typically become sick 1-4 weeks after contact, and symptoms include fever, headache, back and muscle pain and gastrointestinal symptoms. No specific treatment has been developed for the disease and most symptoms are treated with analgesics containing paracetamol. Sometimes renal or lung involvement develops and requires appropriate treatment in hospital setting. Most cases cure spontaneously within 2-3 weeks. It is not considered contagious from person to person. Preventive measures consist avoiding rodents in houses, disinfections of places used by rodents, protective clothing and avoiding deep breathing when manipulating rodents or anything that has been in contact with rodents. Information leaflets on hantavirus infections are available at the IPH, and can be found on the IPH website at http://www.iph.fgov.be/epidemio/epifr/plabfr/info_hanta.htm (in French) or at http://www.iph.fgov.be/epidemio/epinl/plabnl/info_hanta.htm (in Dutch).

Sources: IPH sentinel laboratories and Hantavirus Reference Laboratory. Details on 1996-2001 epidemiology are to be found in the 2001 yearly report (http://www.iph.fgov.be/epidemio/epifr/plabfr/plabanfr/k53_fr.pdf) in French or
Monkey pox: EU bans import of animals at risk

The European Union standing committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health has agreed to ban the import of prairie dogs from the US, and rodents of non-domestic species and squirrels from sub-Saharan Africa because of the risk of monkeypox. The decision will be adopted by the European Commission. Further information on the monkeypox situation in the US is available under “In the rest of the world”. Source: Promed (http://www.promedmail.org)

Outbreak of monkeypox in persons exposed to pet prairie dogs in the US: update

As of 18 June 2003, a total of 87 cases of monkeypox, including 20 confirmed by the CDC laboratory, have been reported from US states (Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Kansas and Missouri). Among the 75 patients for whom data were available, 20 were admitted to hospital. The majority of patients were not seriously ill; some were admitted to facilitate proper isolation. No death has been reported.

The majority of patients had direct or close contact with wild or exotic mammals such as prairie dogs. The monkeypox outbreak is believed to have begun with a shipment of more than 800 rodents, including 50 Gambian giant pouched rats, from Africa - where the disease is endemic - to a distributor in Texas. The rats are believed to have passed the disease to the prairie dogs, which were then sold or traded in the Midwest. The presence of the disease has been confirmed in prairie dogs in certain parts of the USA. Laboratory testing of animals imported from Africa from April 2003 on is underway to determine which, if any, animals in the shipment might have introduced the virus into the US. The known reservoirs in the endemic zone of Africa are squirrels and rodents of non-domestic species in the African rain forest. The virus that causes monkeypox is usually transmitted by contact with lesions on the skin. Person-to-person transmission has not been identified in this outbreak. Investigations are underway to assess the possibility of secondary transmission among health care workers and household contacts exposed to patients with confirmed monkeypox infection.

CDC has issued interim recommendations for use of smallpox vaccine, cidofovir, and vaccinia immune globulin (VIG) for prevention and treatment in the setting of outbreaks of monkeypox infections. It has advised smallpox vaccination for health care workers who have “unprotected contact” with possible cases. Sources: CDC (http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/monkeypox/index.htm) and Promed (http://www.promedmail.org).
Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) worldwide: update

Up to June 17, a cumulative number of 8464 probable cases of SARS have been reported worldwide, including 799 deaths. This represents an increase of only 10 new probable cases and 7 deaths since June 13.

As of 16 June 2003, Health Canada has received reports of 439 probable or suspect cases of SARS in Canada, including 34 deaths. To date, transmission has been limited to specific transmission settings such as households, hospitals and specific community settings. The most recent date of onset of illness is 8 June 2003. No new probable or suspect cases have been reported from other provinces and territories.

The travel advice concerning Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi and Tianjin have been lifted on June 13 and for Taiwan on June 17. The WHO recommendation to postpone all but essential travels is limited to Beijing. Sources: WHO (http://www.who.int) and Promed (http://www.promedmail.org)

West Nile virus resurfaces in 24 US states

West Nile virus has been detected in birds, horses and mosquitoes in at least 24 US states so far this year, according to the CDC, which has tracked the virus since it first emerged in the United States in 1999. No human cases have been reported this year.

In 2002, there were 4156 cases of West Nile virus infection in the US, including 284 deaths, according to the CDC. The outbreak was the largest since the virus first appeared in the Western Hemisphere 4 years ago. Source: Promed (http://www.promedmail.org)